

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, August 21, 1883, with transcript

Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel (Hubbard) Bell. L Washington, Tuesday, August 21st, 1883 Mrs. A. Graham Bell, Oakland Hotel, Oakland, Md. My darling May:

I telegraphed you tonight to let you know that poor Johnson was sinking rapidly. Upon my arrival in Washington this evening I was met by Charlie with horse and buggy. He said that Johnson had only an hour or two to live and that he had been vainly calling for me. I drove to the house at once and it really seemed as if he would die without seeing me. His eyes were turned up so that only the whites could be seen and he was gasping for breath. By and bye he rallied a little and was told I was present. He seemed perfectly conscious but could not see. I took his hand in mine and spoke to him and by and bye he rallied sufficiently to see me and talk to me. The first words he spoke were to his brother who could now hear him — though his voice was almost gone — as he had provided himself with a powerful hearing-tube like my mother's. With this assistance he could hear as well as I could, and it was a most touching sight to see the deaf brother — with tears streaming down his cheeks — listening with all his soul to catch poor Johnson's dying words. I never realized till tonight how much comfort a simple tube could afford.

For weeks Charlie Johnson has been unable to hear his brother's voice — it was too weak and his brother could not raise it to talk to him — and now through the instrumentality of this hearing-tube he can hear his lightest whisper. He could hear him gasping for breath and it seemed as if each gasp would be the last — but at last came the words low but distinct “Brother I love you very much — Poor brother what will you do now?” Then after a little while he said “The doctor thought I was dying this morning — but I didn't — but I may be dying now.” And then they talked for a little while about meeting again bye and bye

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and I realized as I never did before what a consolation such a belief must be to those who really believe it.

After a short time he asked how you were and the children and wanted me to tell you that he often thought of you and wanted me to tell you that he was grateful for all your kindness. At this time another faint turn came on — his eyes turned up — and there was on ominous rattling sound in his throat — but he came out of it again. He wanted very much to say something but could not speak for some time. After waiting for a long time we heard him whisper — “I love you Mr. Bell” — Then after another pause — “You have been very kind to me” — “Tell Mr. Hubbard I love him — You can never know how much I feel all you have done for me” — and then the tears rolled down his cheeks. He was evidently afraid that he would die without having thanked us and feared we would think him ungrateful. This was why he was so anxious to see me. He evidently did not want to forget anybody for after a little while he said “I love you and Mrs. Bell and Elsie and Daisy and Mr. and Mrs. Hubbard and Miss Hubbard.” This effort proved too much for him — and he could not articulate for a long time afterwards.

The effort of speaking was evidently too hard on him so I thought I better go. He tried to detain me and wanted me to tell him 3 that I loved him before I went. I told him that I did love him and that he might be sure that whatever happened I would be a friend to his brother. He said he knew I would and that it was a great comfort to him. He then asked me to kiss him and said good bye.

I cannot write any more little wife — I am too sad at heart. The death of an old man is but the full completion of his life — but is it not hard that a young man — just beginning life — with bright prospects and a hopeful future — should die now. All his preparations for life complete and then —?

I cabled Johnson's message to your father in hopes that some reply may reach him before he dies. I fear however it will be too late.

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Your loving husband, Alec.